

Dovetail

A Journal by and for Jewish/Christian Families



Angel in the House? Women's Roles in Interfaith Marriages

It is appropriate that this issue of **Dovetail** should focus on women: its production has been affected by a range of circumstances deeply embedded in what are thought of as women's issues.

General editor Debi Tenner has decided to take a leave of absence to deal with a series of family emergencies. We wish her well and look forward to her speedy return.

Managing Editor Kelly Kozlowsky is on maternity leave. We welcome the little one into the Dovetail family, and congratulate Kelly and Dan.

As for me, I find myself back in the editorial saddle after a month of personal ups and downs. The highest high: our daughter, Sarah Rosenbaum, whom some of you may remember from Dovetail conferences and others from my story in the last issue on her wedding to our wonderful son-in-law Yukio Tezuka, gave birth to a healthy, beautiful baby boy. Baby and mother (and father!) are all doing well now, but the birth process was long and difficult—Sarah was fully effaced and dilated for more than four hours, and her emergency caesarean section came after some eighteen hours of extremely hard labor. As a result, I made the difficult decision not to go to the Dovetail conference in Berkeley, the first of our conferences I've missed. I say the decision was difficult, but "disappointing" might be a better word; in fact it was a no-brainer, and I never had any doubt about where my first priorities lay. As it turned out, it was as well I did make that choice, since shortly after her release from the hospital Sarah started to hemorrhage. Riding beside her in the ambulance in the middle of the

night (Yukio was following in the car with the baby); pacing and praying in the waiting room; trading heel-and-toe watches with Yukio to stay in her room round the clock, to look out for her and to hand the baby through the thicket of tubes surrounding her so she could continue to breast-feed; slapping together scratch meals for Yukio to bolt between spending the night in the hospital and rushing to work; I knew I was needed where I was. For me, and for most women, I imagine, an easy choice, really.

Not that our traditional involvement with matters of family necessarily makes everything easy for the men. Obviously, it took a toll on Yukio to remain both strong and tenderly attentive throughout Sarah's ordeals. But it was hard in a different way for my husband Ned to tear himself away from his beloved daughter to stand in for me and help Alicia Torre, Oscar Rosenbloom, Sue Katz-Miller, Ina Albert, Mike and Bonnie Farnon, Dan and Abbe Josephs, and all our other wonderful Dovetail stalwarts make the conference such a smashing success.

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It was also hard for him to miss the extra cuddling of our new grandson, and the events of the seventh and eighth days of his life.

On the seventh night, the baby received his official naming in the Shinto tradition. His father, with brush and black ink on rice paper, inscribed his names: Benjamin-Yoshito Rosenbaum Tezuka, and the date. We set the inscription and the baby (in his carrier) on the table, toasted him in sake, and ate pink rice and sweet bean paste balls. Meanwhile, in Japan, his aunt and other grandmother were "presenting" him to his Japanese ancestors.

The next night was the baby's bris. The mohelet (female ritual circumciser), Emily Blake, is also an MD; in addition, she's a warm, caring person who eased Sarah's jitters,

gracefully navigated the interfaith dimensions of our family, and efficiently performed the operation without causing a single squawk from the baby. (For one thing, departing from tradition, she gave him the soporific wine *before* the procedure.) We all choked up as they explained the significance of little Ben-Yoshi's names: Benjamin after Ben Blutstein, our godson and Sarah's friend, who was killed in the Hebrew University Cafeteria bombing two years to the day before the bris; Yoshito after Yukio's late father, whose whole family perished during World War II.

Ned said later that it had grieved him to miss this most Jewish of events in the life of his grandson. But then, thinking of that old joke in which the mother whose son is miracu-

lously restored to her says indignantly to the Almighty, "He had a HAT!" he remembered to be grateful that Sarah and Ben-Yoshi are both safe and sound. And that, in turn, made me grateful that our society's gender-based expectations made it so easy for me to choose the family priority over the professional one.

I think all of us—whether we're Jewish or Christian, women or men; whether we stay at home or go out to work—can relate to the feeling in a song by Sylvia Frickert (of Ian and Sylvia, for my fellow old-folkies): "Woman's world, cooking and babies/Little girls with knowing eyes;/Women's world, drawn in a circle/Smaller than truth and bigger than lies." 



Please remember us in your will and trusts.

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Dovetail's mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents, and their children. No matter what their specific choices regarding faith for their home and children, the more interfaith families can share their ideas, experiences, resources, and support, the more they can make peace in their homes and communities. Jewish and Christian perspectives can dovetail.

Believing that there are no definitive answers to the questions facing interfaith families, **Dovetail** strives to be open to all ideas and opinions. Editorial content attempts to balance and respect the perspectives of both Jewish and Christian partners in interfaith marriages, as well as the diverse perspectives of parents and children of interfaith couples. Inclusion in **Dovetail** does not imply endorsement. **Dovetail** accepts a thoughtful and constructive discussion of all related issues in the Letters to the Editor section, and reserves the right to reply.

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Jewish Homes Anchored by Non-Jewish Women

by Stanley Ned Rosenbaum

I don't know whose the oldest profession was, but the oldest religion was women's. Looking at the archeological records of thirty thousand years ago (that is, shortly after humans acquired the ability to talk) we find all manner of female statuettes—some with exaggerated genitalia, others cupping their breasts—cluttering up various sites in the Ancient Near East. Their quality leads one to suspect they weren't art projects, but had to do with religion.

We know from later societies—even from some modern ones—that a woman's primary function was to produce children, male children preferred. Women and men alike would be interested in producing (male) offspring, so (and here's the kicker), any god or goddess the women could invoke to further this noble end would be okay all around.

The Biblical Background

The aspect of this of interest to **Dovetail** readers is that in the biblical period there was a whole lot more "intermarriage" than our Judeo-Christian tradition remembers, or wishes to. They wouldn't have called it intermarriage back then, but think of the foreign women (and some men) who joined the Israelite community: shadowy and minor figures like Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho and Asenath, the wife of Joseph in Egypt; and more prominent ones like Moses' wife, Zipporah, and the much-celebrated Ruth.

But what about Sarai/Sarah? What religion was she before she met Abram/Abraham? And Rebekah, sister of the wily Laban whose family snake god (take my word for it, or

better yet, buy Rosenbaum and Secher's *Strange Wives: The Paradox of Biblical Intermarriage*, if we can find someone to publish it) was stolen by our own dear Rachel. Rashi ("Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, French, 11th century) noted this theft, saying that Rachel stole the idol not for herself, but to wean her father from idolatry. Can't you see Laban waking up next morning and saying, "Drat! My teraphim is stolen; guess I'll have to become a monotheist."

No, women had their own religions. Women also worshipped Venus, sign of the mating season and still our "Goddess of Love." Jewish rituals surrounding the appearance of each new moon recall worship of the heavenly body that informed women in ancient times, as it still does, whether or not they are carrying. We don't call women's period "menstruation" (from the Latin *menses*, "months") for nothing. But didn't the women all convert, I hear you ask? It would not have been seen as necessary, at least not until way late in Israel's history. Ezra, who first called for the divorce from foreign women, came about 800 years after the intermarried Moses.

And what would there have been to convert to? Judaism might be monotheistic, but it was never monolithic. Denominations such as Reform and Conservative, which we associate with the modern period, had their counterparts in ancient times. Even during the short-lived united kingdom of Saul, David, and Solomon, there were a number of variations on the theme. Solomon is noted for having had 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of them not Jewish.

*(Stanley) Ned Rosenbaum is one of the founding Directors of DI-IFR. Ned got his Ph.D. in Judaic Studies from Brandeis in 1974. By that time he'd been intermarried for ten years and had three children. Since then no more children, but he has written (or co-authored) three books, including **Celebrating Our Differences: Living Two Faiths in One Marriage** with wife Mary Helene, and been intermarried another thirty years. Ned taught everything Jewish at Dickinson College (Carlisle, PA) for 28 years and is now teaching part-time at the University of Kentucky and co-writing a book with Rabbi Allen Secher, titled **Strange Wives; The Paradox of Biblical Intermarriage**.*

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Jewish tradition has a delightful bit wherein Naomi, Ruth's former mother-in-law, puts Ruth through her paces like a modern rabbi, but in fact Naomi had no such authorization from any rabbinical council for the simple reason that there were no rabbinical councils then.

During the long centuries of Jewish history, a lot of women (God bless 'em) have attached themselves to Judaism by saying, like Ruth, "your people shall be my people" and by adopting Jewish practices, without giving up their previous religious beliefs. In a previous era they were known as "heaven worshippers" and legislated against along with their Jewish compatriots by pagan Rome.

Today's Direction

Today, we at the Dovetail Institute often hear from Christian or secular non-Jewish women who have undertaken to transmit the traditions and rituals of Judaism to their children. (It does seem to be a gender-related phenomenon, partly because in partnerships where the woman is the Jew, the children are considered Jewish whether she makes any special effort or not.) She may be unsure as to what really constitutes a Jewish household, and how to go about maintaining one and infusing it with spiritual meaning.

One Jewish Outreach professional who attended Dovetail's 2004 conference came away with the impression (based on attendance at a mere two of the 25 workshops and three plenary addresses offered) that our purpose is to undermine the efforts of her organization and others like it. Those of you who know us know better, but it bears repeating: our aim is to help inter-

faith couples make the choices best for them and their situation, and then to provide resources to help them implement those choices. When it comes to those women who have not converted to Judaism but have chosen to maintain Jewish households, Jewish institutions bear a special responsibility.

I suggest that outreach efforts be focused on education of both partners, beginning with clear explanations that will help the non-Jewish partner feel less adrift and uncertain. There may be questions, from the simple to the sophisticated: can a gentile woman perform the candle-lighting ceremony? may she participate in the kiddush? does she have to eat (or serve) gefulte fish? In the synagogue, can she/may she join in the prayers? daven or bow? If she will not be allowed to sit on the bimah at her child's bar/bat mitzvah, this should be explained to her in non-judgmental, non-excluding terms. If she's trying to prepare her house for Passover, some tactful assistance from an experienced housekeeper may be welcome.

Finally, it is at least as important for the Jewish partner to pursue a broader knowledge and deeper understanding of Judaism than that achieved by the average thirteen-year-old Jewish children, whether their parents are intermarried or not, can and should be exposed to positive Jewish experiences—but they'll notice where both their parents are truly committed, and they'll tend to make their own choices accordingly. 

Who Do You Think You Are? Gender and Intermarriage

by Mary Helene Rosenbaum

The biblical Book of Proverbs extols the “Woman of Valor,” who not only “provides clothes for her household” and “assigns duties to her maidservants,” but “thinks of a field and buys it; with the gain of her own hands she purchases a vineyard” and “fashions girdles for the merchant.” This paean to female competence and financial independence is read to a wife by her husband in observant households every Friday night.

I’m glad my husband reads it to me—otherwise I might not know, when this “Old Testament” reading comes round in church every three years, how the compilers of the lectionary have bowdlerized it. Somehow, as read to Catholics, it has lost all the independent, vigorous attributes and left only those extolling domestic housewifely virtues. She spins and weaves and gives to charity; verses characterizing her as an independent business-woman are excised, and gone are the passages about giving orders to her household, being clothed in strength and dignity, or giving kindly instruction.

When I was a lector (Catholic lay reader), if the selection came up on a Sunday when I was assigned to read, I typed up the full-length version and read that, and left the typescript in the book for other lectors to use at other masses that day. I don’t know whether they did or not; I do know that, though I did this with my pastor’s permission, somehow the typed complete text never survived till the cycle brought it around again.

If you saw *Yentl*, you know that long before industrialization the Ortho-

dox Jewish male ideal had more and more become the constant scholar. It was considered laudable and correct for women to be the breadwinners so the men could spend the day in study. The hitch, of course, is that—like today’s “superwomen”—they were also expected to run the home and raise the children. No wonder they seemed domineering and overpowering to people reared on post-Industrial gentile notions of the idle woman as status symbol. In fact, as the German Jews achieved economic parity with gentiles, they, too, began to consider it a mark of status for wives to be “non-working.”

The whole complex of questions about gender roles and the nature of women and men is no less tangled for Christians. Many volumes have been written on the subject, touching on the conflicting scriptural pattern. The same St. Paul who said both, “There is no male nor female... but all are one in Christ Jesus,” also said, “Let the women keep silent in the churches.”

Historically, the value to Catholics of the Blessed Virgin has been that she stands as an exemplar who suffered much of what many women suffer: childbirth, poverty, the death of a child; and triumphed as a woman and as a perfected soul. The paradox is that the institutional church never seemed to notice that she did all this without a man—as Sojourner Truth pointed out—having any part of it. Even the divine conception was an engendering by the Holy Spirit: “spirit” in Greek is a neuter word, not a masculine one; in Hebrew, it is feminine.

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Much study has also been expended on the overlapping layers of historical religion—abbesses in the medieval church were so powerful they frightened the men; the Reformation influenced people away from both the glorification of celibacy as an ideal and the veneration of Mary as embodiment of it.

The Intermarriage Angle

Stereotypes about what men and women can and cannot do/feel/believe/accomplish are destructive and don't correspond to reality. For religious people this adds another dimension to the complications of an intermarriage.

Most troubling to a Christian feminist married to a Jew will be the streak of antisemitism running through some recent feminist thought. In their delight at the discovery that Jesus was not a male chauvinist, they have fallen into the classic Christian trap of accentuating the strengths of Christianity by exaggerating the weaknesses of Judaism. From the real or imagined sins of the modern state of Israel to the desire to see Jesus as unique in his own time, some feminist Christians have developed a superior or even derogatory attitude. In the same vein as the old canard about Jews unbearably burdened under the "yoke of the Law," modern versions like to see them as bound by ancient divisive and repressive social models.

The tendency to contrast the teachings of Jesus to attitudes reflected in the Torah would be rather like calling the National Conference of Catholic Bishops feminist because they're so much more tolerant than St. Paul: maybe they are and maybe they aren't, but

you'd be comparing attitudes separated by lifestyle, history, and 2,000 years—much the same difference between Jesus and, say, Abraham. Jesus is much more usefully compared, in his social attitudes, to the rabbinical commentators of his time, who insisted that women had souls and spiritual responsibilities just as men did.

Jewish feminists may find the most troubling circumstance in the movement to be the political anti-Zionism that not only demonizes Israel but that seeks to avoid threatening—or endangering—Arab and other Moslem feminists by ignoring or downplaying the extremely misogynistic practices endemic in their cultures. If you're in that position, you might quote Phyllis Chesler: "American feminists may put down Israel for its macho men and patriarchal religion, as I do, but if you were a feminist in trouble, where would you go for asylum, Israel or Saudi Arabia?"

Who Does Your Partner Think You Are?

In your cradle family, did the women take all responsibility for maintaining relationships—writing the thank-you notes, planning the get-togethers, composing the Christmas or Rosh Hashanah family newsletter, luring a troubled-seeming teenager into the kitchen for confidences over the tea towels? In this common American situation, as a friend of mine once put it, the men stroll into the well-nourished, healthy personal relationships as they would into a swept and garnished house. But hand them a broom—or a situation involving exploring feelings—and they don't know what to do with it.

In our melting pot society, I'm not aware of a significant difference between Christians and Jews in this tendency to consider the human dimension of life as situated in a woman's world. Where it has special impact on the interfaith family, though, is in the fact that the partners may have different ideas about what relationships need tending, and how.

For instance, a Jewish man might not particularly care whether his cousin gets a bread-and-butter letter after a family weekend, but expect as a matter of course that his wife will have phone conversations with his mother several times a week. A Christian husband may have the reverse expectations.

Or a Jewish woman might think it natural and laudable to go to her parents for advice over marital problems, to her husband's embarrassment; this might never occur to a gentile woman, to her husband's frustration.

A dual set of holidays throws this problem into sharpest relief: is one partner responsible for both onslaughts of greetings/gifts/entertaining?

My suggestion: in assigning spousal responsibility where in-laws—or friends and colleagues from one religious group or the other—are concerned, the one whose relationship it primarily is should take responsibility for maintaining it. If it's his cousin, he writes the bread-and-butter letter. If it's his mother, he has the base-touching conversations (Mom will probably find this variation from her norm weird, but acceptable). If it's the wife's parents,

she can talk to them about marital affairs if that makes her comfortable (but she should make sure they understand they should be discreet and not display insider knowledge around her husband). If he's the one who wants parental advice, he can go to his own parents himself, with the same caveat about discretion.

This is no panacea. You'll still have to deal with practical questions regarding your relationship with each other such as who you each think "ought" to be in charge of balancing the checkbook. Of course, that's a question that has something to do with received notions about gender and money but a lot more to do with cultural assumptions about gender and power.

You might try switching roles for a while—if you can't do it for a long period, do it for an evening, or a weekend. Notice how you feel as you enact your partner's patterns; notice how your partner's enactment of yours does or doesn't jibe with your own image of yourself. Videotape the experience if possible. Afterwards, share your conclusions as though you were critiquing a movie or a play—that is, objectively, without getting into personal accusations or defensiveness.

Good luck, both of you. 🍀

I believe that neither Christianity nor Judaism is irredeemably sexist—both have a deep-seated egalitarianism of the spirit, that can be recovered from early texts, glimpsed struggling toward the light through history, and rediscovered by women and men trying to grow together today.

Different Gifts: One Woman's Perspective on Two worlds

by Debi Tenner

*Debi Tenner is a mother of two teens, aged 15 and 13, and a spouse in an interfaith marriage. She coordinated an Interfaith Sunday School for the New Haven Area Interfaith Families Group in Connecticut for five years. She has taught Middle School and directed a variety of summer camp and after school programs for the town of Hamden and for the Congregational Churches of Connecticut. She is the general editor of **Dovetail**, and has participated in leading workshops at several Dovetail National Conferences*

From an early age, I knew I had a gift for music. It wasn't a talent that I needed to display, or an instrumental dexterity that I earned through hard work, but simply the gift of hearing, understanding, and appreciating music. At first I didn't think of it as a gift; it was mainly just fun. It fit my life, whether it was classical, jazz, rock, pop, opera, Broadway, country. With music, no matter where I was, I felt I had come home. I could listen to a new piece of music and identify the intentions and soul of its singer, and sometimes also its songwriter. I could listen to various songs and lyrics all day and never be tired at the end, only uplifted.

It was many years later that I realized that I also had a "non-gift": I just don't understand art. It a difficult thing for me to admit and even accept that I don't quite "get" art and I probably never will.

On a weekend in Las Vegas a few years ago, I visited "The Art Collection of Steve Martin," at the Bellagio Hotel. I learned that he had donated a true collection, not to be funny but because he is an art lover. There was a wonderful set-up of mind boggling electronics that allowed you to push the right buttons and hear Steve Martin speak about each of the paintings and sculptures in his collection. I noticed immediately that the familiar, funny, easy going voice of Steve Martin relaxed me and instructed me carefully on each display, each nuance, and each historical fact.

The paintings and sculptures were all extraordinary and valuable, and most were quite famous. I walked the entire gallery twice, listening and

absorbing as much as I could. I was captivated and moved. It was an enjoyable experience and I felt I learned a lot. But I knew when I left the art collection and handed in my earphones, I still didn't quite "get it." All the studying and concentration of my brain cells could not add up to understanding the heart and soul of the artists or the art they created. It actually tired me out.

With music, the gift had been found in my soul long before I even began the study of it. With music, for me, one plus one easily makes three, but art is still a logical sum of two. It was this lesson in art and music that so clearly mirrors my struggles with the cultural and spiritual differences between the two religions in our household and the gender differences attached to them. The music/art model has helped me walk through so many of the differences in our relationship, and enabled me to keep confidence that I am on the correct path for me. Perhaps it's really not a matter of coping with difficult issues, but just admitting that I don't always understand and wonder if I am up to the task. Walking in someone else's shoes for a while will teach you one thing really quickly: what your own true shoe size really is!

"Keeping the faith" to me means that I have to trust in my own heritage and my own understandings of who I am and where I came from at all times. That is what gives me the compass to find where I want to go. I may not always get to a place where I am fully understanding of my partner's heritage, culture, or gender issues. But I can always work from where I am towards deeper respect, even if I don't fully comprehend.

Keep the faith! 

The Path to Harmony

by Courtney S. Wilder

The Vatican, in a recent statement entitled, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," explicitly blames feminism for "antagonism" and "opposition between men and women." The letter, endorsed by Pope John Paul II and penned by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, suggests that feminism has fostered an environment in which "the identity and role of one [gender is] emphasized to the disadvantage of the other, leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person" with "lethal effects" on the family. Feminist thought, it argues, "call[s] into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make[s] homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality."

What is perhaps most striking about the letter is its language. The terms in which the Church's vision for women is expressed often sound feminist indeed. The statement seeks to clarify the "authentic advancement of women," and argues that the work of women, whether inside or outside the home, should be supported and valued: "In this way, women who freely desire will be able to devote the totality of their time to the work of the household without being stigmatized ... while those who wish also to engage in other work may be able to do so with an appropriate work-schedule, and not have to choose between relinquishing their family life or enduring continual stress"

The content of the letter, however, recapitulates solidly traditional

gender roles. The letter explicitly asserts that women are to be most highly valued for their contribution to their families. It portrays women as having a natural, biological role as wives and mothers (or virgins, dedicated to things spiritual) given to them by God. The Pope calls this innate quality, which entails selfless, Christ-like dedication to others and particularly to the family, the "genius of women."

The statement accuses feminism on the grounds that, in seeking to redress inequalities between men and women, feminists deny the biological differences between the sexes—differences which, the Vatican holds, should determine social and spiritual roles. This denial, they charge, is accompanied by encouragement to grab for power and antagonize men. Thus, the document faults feminism as a force that prevents men and women from living together in harmony.

The letter provides theological exegesis supporting the view of the human self that is articulated. In accounting for division and strife between men and women, the document points to sin. "God's decisive words to the woman after the first sin express the kind of relationship which has now been introduced between man and woman: 'your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (Gn 3:16)." Repentance and a return to divinely ordained gender roles, it argues, is the path back to harmony.

Critiquing the Critique

What the Vatican overlooks in their critique of feminism is what feminist theologians have been talking about for over forty years: the injustice and

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[F]eminism is not the source of the disrepair located in male-female relationships.

sinfulness of sexism. Theologians or not, feminists have long given voice to the situation of women; but feminism is not the source of the disrepair located in male-female relationships. Calling attention to a situation of sin and suffering and encouraging justice, these are not the roots of division and strife—the sin itself is.

Perhaps an injunction to men to support and value their spouses as fellow children of God, to speak out against workplace harassment and discrimination, to share in the care of home and children, and to reflect upon their own conduct would be a more effective way for the Catholic church to support the authentic advancement of women. Instead, they have said, in effect, that women should be put upon a pedestal and kept there. 

Women Who Would Be Rabbis (Review)

In 1889, journalist and Jewish community activist Mary M. Cohen published a short story in Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent* that raised the question: Could not our women be ministers? The question had been around since perhaps as early as the Civil War; Jewish women taught Jewish studies and Talmud, and organized Jewish schools. Several American rabbis' widows would even take over their late husbands' duties without rabbinical ordination, following the model for women leaders established by the biblical Deborah.

Even so, ordination for Jewish women remained merely a question to be raised and debated, closed, and raised again. Women had, according to both male and female Jewish scholars, lower status in the Bible. In the words of one male scholar, their place was as high priestesses in the sanctuary of their home, commanded to be good wives and good mothers in Israel. However, in the chaos of immigration and resettlement in the United States, it had most often been women who maintained a family's connection to synagogues and temples. The charge that they must work in the sanctuary of their homes expanded to include the sanctuary of their Jewish communities and congregations, where they promoted, organized, and taught in religious schools and founded youth groups. By the 1960s and 1970s, with women's roles in society changing and more and more women seeking higher education, the distinguished rabbinical schools and committees were finally ready to listen.

In *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, Pamela S. Nadell, director of Jewish Studies at American University,

writes that it took nearly a century to negotiate the path from the rising expectations for women in the rabbinate to the first of the women who became Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative rabbis. But finally, in 1972, Sally Priesand, the first woman rabbi, was ordained by Hebrew Union College, a Reform Jewish school in Cincinnati. In 1974, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, ordained at Philadelphia's Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, associated with Temple University, became the first woman rabbi of a Reconstructionist congregation. In 1985, after women had organized and reorganized in the Conservative Jewish community, Amy Eilberg was ordained by the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In the 1990s, according to Nadell, even learned Orthodox Jewish women were asking to lead their congregations. Nadell draws detailed portraits of the first women rabbis, as well as the women on whose shoulders they are standing—women who led their communities, thought and wrote about the question of women rabbis, and knocked again and again at the doors of training institutions and influential committees.

Nadell's book documents not only the lives and desires of particular Jewish women but the way change happens in and among cultures and communities. Jewish women are now seen as able to carry out the biblical mission of high priestesses of their families and at the same time to lead their congregations. Might not these congregations, then, more and more come to resemble families? Twenty years from now, Nadell might well be able to write a book on this and other ways in which a leader's gender can shape a congregation. ■

Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination 1889-1985, by Pamela S. Nadell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998)

Book Review
by Sheila Bender

Sheila Bender publishes an online journal for people who write from personal experience at www.writingitreal.com. Her newest book on writing, **Writing and Publishing Personal Essays**, is forthcoming from Silver Threads in San Diego, January 2005. You can learn more about Sheila at www.sheilabender.com.

Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World (Review)

Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World, by Christine Benvenuto (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2004)

Book Review by Carol Weiss Rubel

Carol Weiss Rubel is an educator who holds a bachelor's degree in English and advanced degrees in English and education. A community activist, her creative approach to problem solving has resulted in the formation of an alternative high school program for at-risk teens (Scranton City School District, Pennsylvania) which has been presented as a national level. Sought after as a resource and motivational speaker, Carol embraces collaboration as the optimal problem-solving model in professional and personal avenues. Carol Weiss Rubel is the adult child of an interfaith marriage; she is a practicing Roman Catholic married to an observant Conservative Jew.

Traditionally, the gentile woman has long been a magnet for intense feelings among Jews, from male yearning to communal hatred. She is simultaneously an erotic trophy and a parent's worst nightmare, the butt of crude jokes and a force credited with the power to bring down a people. Her almost mythic status has tangled historical roots in the culture's most potent fears and fantasies, and wide-ranging repercussions in the Jewish community today.

Christine Benvenuto's opening paragraph in her recently released book, *Shiksa*, provides readers with the literary equivalent of a perfectly delivered invitation out for a dinner date: the words provide enough familiar context so as not to be frightening and hint at enough potential surprise so as to make refusal impossible. Indeed, Benvenuto has written a book which should be required reading for all women whether they are gentile or Jew, married or single. Throughout the easy-to-read volume, Benvenuto weaves history, biblical interpretation, and first-person narratives of contemporary women into a story worthy of Sheherazade.

Sexual seduction, religious destruction, matrilineal descent, interfaith marriage turmoil, and candid peeks into the private journeys of some women who have chosen the path of conversion, as well as some who have not (Dovetail's own Mary Rosenbaum among them!), bubble around each other throughout the book as Benvenuto grapples with both the articulated as well as the unspoken feelings that Jews have had toward both the Christian woman and the woman who converts to Judaism.

Since Benvenuto herself is a convert, she brings an undeniable authenticity to her work; this is not an abstract treatise. Rather, this work acknowledges the fears that have colored the view of the stranger as well as the realities that the strangers experience once within the tribe, whether as visitors or resident aliens.

Like so much in Judaism, these questions of conversion call up contradictions. The convert who is called a resident alien (*gerah*) is also said to be a person who has come under the wings of *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of G-d. The *Shekhinah* doesn't rent out rooms by the night. For one who is granted a home beneath those wings, there is tremendous obligation to serve Judaism. If the terms of a convert's personal relationships, her membership in *Am Yisrael*, doesn't support such activism, they must be renegotiated.

Especially sensitive are the explanations of Torah, Talmud, and Mishnah that the author includes when appropriate. Readers with limited knowledge of Judaism will not be overwhelmed; readers who are more fluent in the customs and traditions will not feel as if they are reading a primer. The final strength of *Shiksa*, this reviewer believes, is the solid academic foundation upon which the context rests: gentile woman have always been a part of Jewish history. *Shiksa: the Gentile Woman in the Jewish World* does a fabulous job of coaxing the hidden out from the shadows and into the light the light of honest analysis and rationality. This book should find its way onto your must-read list—the sooner, the better. 

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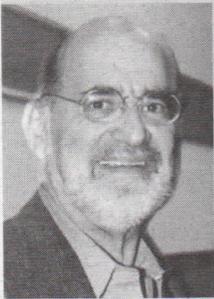
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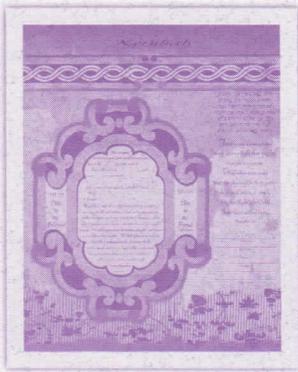
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